

# Shall Women Have the Right to Vote? (1866–1890)

**Directions:** Keep these discussion questions in mind as you read the background essay, making marginal notes as desired. Respond to the reflection and analysis questions at the end of the essay.

## Discussion Questions

- How had the work of women to end slavery helped them develop skills that would ultimately be useful in the women’s suffrage struggle?
- What might be meant by the term, “the conscience of the nation,” and how did the fight against slavery help demonstrate that concept?
- What arguments might have been made against women’s suffrage?
- Why were Western states the first to grant suffrage to women?

## Introduction

After the Civil War, the nation was finally poised to extend the promise of liberty expressed in the Declaration of Independence to newly emancipated African Americans. But the women’s suffrage movement was split: Should women push to be included in the Fifteenth Amendment? Should they wait for the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to be adopted before turning to women’s suffrage, or should they seize the moment and demand the vote now? Not content to wait, Susan B. Anthony and other workers in the movement engaged in civil disobedience to wake the conscience of a nation. Meanwhile, railroads opened the West to settlement, and Western territories tried to boost population by offering votes for women.

Life for women in the mid-nineteenth century was as diverse as it is now. What was considered socially appropriate behavior for women varied

widely across the country, based on region, social class, and other factors. Branches of the women’s suffrage movement disagreed regarding tactics, and some women (and many men) did not even believe women’s suffrage was appropriate or necessary. Ideals of the **Cult of Domesticity**, in which women were believed to possess the natural virtues of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness, were still a powerful influence on culture. An important debate and split in the women’s suffrage movement between a state and national strategy emerged during this period.

## The Cult of True Womanhood

The Cult of Domesticity, also known as the Cult of True Womanhood, affirmed the idea that natural differences between the sexes meant women, especially those of the upper and middle

classes, were too delicate for work outside the home. According to this view, such women were more naturally suited to parenting, teaching, and making homes, which were their natural “sphere,” happy and peaceful for their families. In other words, it was unnatural and unladylike for women to work outside the home.

Educator and political activist Catharine Beecher wrote in 1871, “Woman’s great mission is to train immature, weak, and ignorant creatures [children] to obey the laws of God . . . first in the family, then in the school, then in the neighborhood, then in the nation, then in the world.” For Beecher and other writers, the role of homemaker was held up as an honored and dignified position for women, worthy of high esteem. Their contribution to public life would include managing the home in a manner that would support their husbands. According to this conception of the roles of men and women, men were considered to be exhausted, soiled, and corrupted by their participation in work and politics, and needed a peaceful, pure home life to enable them to recover their virtue.

Increasingly, women found their political voice through their work in social reform movements. Jane Addams, co-founder with Helen Gates Starr of Hull House and pioneer of social work in America, wrote in 1902, “The sphere of morals is the sphere of action . . . It is well to remind ourselves, from time to time, that ‘Ethics’ is but another word for ‘righteousness . . .’” She noted that, to solve problems related to the needs of children, public health, and other social concerns that affected the home, women needed the vote.

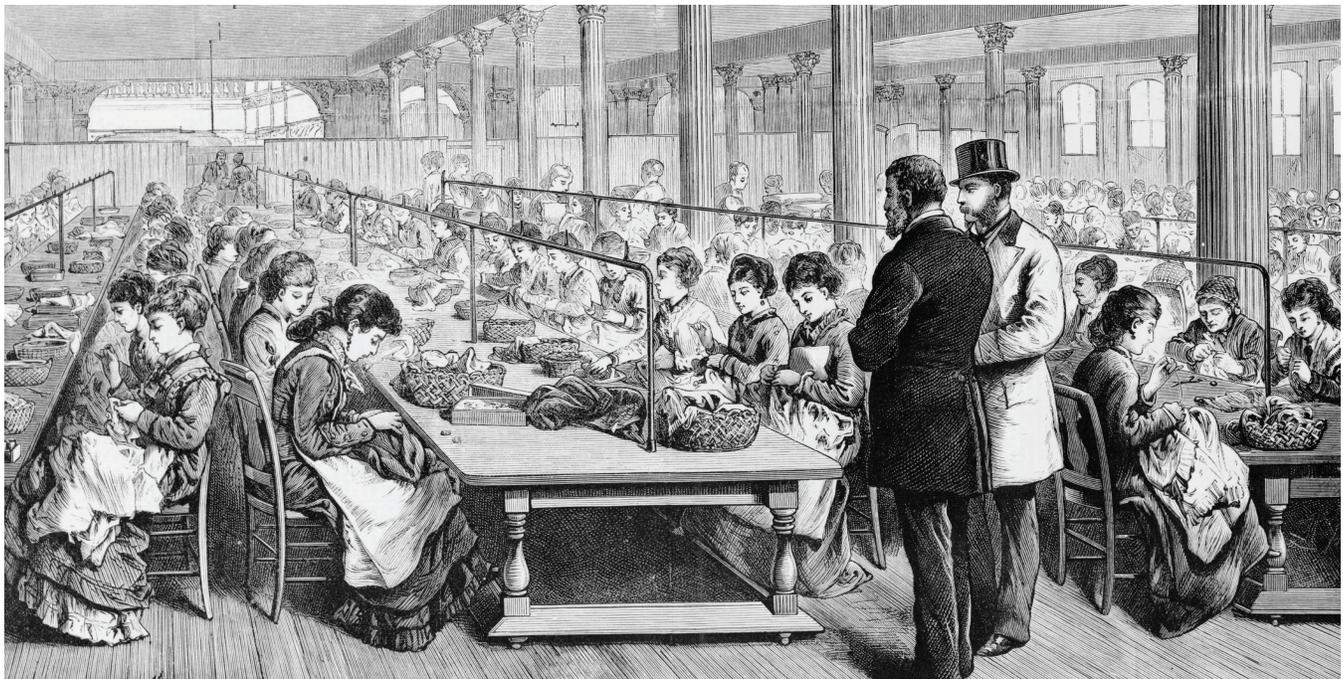
In keeping with the feminine ideals of piety and purity, many women continued work within the temperance movement to campaign against the excesses of drunkenness. This cause was considered a socially permissible moral effort through which women could participate in public

life, because of the damaging effects of alcohol abuse on the family. Annie Wittenmyer, a social reformer and war widow from Ohio who had reported on terrible hospital conditions during the Civil War, founded the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874 to build support for the idea of abstaining from alcohol use.

According to the tradition of Republican Motherhood, education should prepare girls to become mothers who raised educated citizens for the republic. In a challenge to the Cult of Domesticity, the latter half of the nineteenth century saw an expansion of broader academic opportunities for upper class females of college age in the United States. In the Northeast, liberal arts schools modeled after Wesleyan College (1836) in Macon, Georgia, opened. In 1844, Hillsdale College opened in Michigan, one of the first American colleges whose charter prohibited any discrimination based on race, religion, or sex. Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, founded in 1861, and Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, founded in 1875, also expanded educational opportunities for women. Teaching was among the first professions women entered in large numbers. During and after the Civil War, new opportunities also developed for women to become nurses.

## The Changing Roles of Women

While these career options did not radically challenge the cultural ideal of traditional womanhood, the work landscape of America was changing. As the United States economy grew to provide more options, people began to see themselves as consumers as well as producers. Indeed, mass consumerism drove new manufacturing methods. During the second industrial revolution, the United States started moving from an agricultural economy



▲ New York City—The sewing-room at A.T. Stewart’s, between Ninth and Tenth Streets, Broadway and Fourth Avenue / Hyde, 1875. Library of Congress.

toward incorporating new modes of production, manufacturing, and consumer behavior.

Young working-class women worked in the same laundries, factories, and textile mills as poor and immigrant men, often spending twelve hours a day, seven days a week, in hot, dangerous conditions. Also, women found work as store clerks in the many new department stores that opened to sell factory-made clothing and other mass-produced items.

### The Suffrage Movement Grows

Women continued to work to secure their right to vote. The Civil War ended in April of 1865 and the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified eight months later, banning slavery throughout the United States. A burning question remained: How would the rights of former slaves be protected? As the nation’s attention turned to civil rights and voting with the debates surrounding the Fourteenth and

Fifteenth Amendments, many women hoped to seize the opportunity to gain the vote alongside African American men.

The Civil War had forced women’s suffrage advocates to pause their efforts toward winning the vote, but in 1866 they came together at the eleventh National Women’s Rights Convention in New York. The group voted to call itself the American Equal Rights Association and work for the rights of all Americans. Appealing to the Cult of Domesticity, they argued that giving women the vote would improve government by bringing women’s virtues of piety and purity into politics, resulting in a more civilized, “maternal commonwealth.”

### The Movement Splits

The American Equal Rights Association seemed poised for success with such well-known leaders as Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, and Frederick Douglass. But internal divisions soon became

clear. Whose rights should be secured first? Some, especially former abolitionist leaders, wanted to wait until newly emancipated African American men had been given the vote before working to win it for women. Newspaper editor Horace Greeley urged, “This is a critical period for the Republican Party and the life of our Nation . . . I conjure you to remember that this is ‘the negro’s hour,’ and your first duty now is to go through the State and plead his claims.” Lucy Stone, Henry Blackwell, and Julia Ward Howe agreed.

But for Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the time for women also was now. Along with many others, they saw the move to put the cause of women’s suffrage on hold as a betrayal of both the principles of equality and **republicanism**. Frederick Douglass, who saw

suffrage for African American men as a matter of life or death, challenged Anthony on this question, asking whether she believed granting women the vote would truly do anything to change the inequality under law between the sexes. Without missing a beat, Anthony responded:

“It will change the nature of one thing very much, and that is the dependent condition of woman. It will place her where she can earn her own bread, so that she may go out into the world an equal competitor in the struggle for life.”

In the wake of this bitter debate, not one but two national organizations for women’s suffrage were established in 1869. Stone and Blackwell founded the **American Woman Suffrage Association** (AWSA). Worried that the Fifteenth Amendment would not pass if it included votes for women, the AWSA put their energy into convincing the individual states to give women the vote in their state constitutions. Anthony and Stanton founded the **National Woman Suffrage Association** (NWSA). They worked to win votes for women via an amendment to the U.S. Constitution at the same time as it would protect the right of former slaves to vote. Anthony and Stanton started the NWSA’s newspaper, *The Revolution*, in 1868. Its motto was, “Men, their rights, and nothing more; women, their rights, and nothing less.”

The NWSA was a broad coalition that included some progressives who questioned the fitness of African Americans and immigrants to vote because of the prevailing views of Social Darwinism. The racism against black males voting was especially prevalent in the South where white women supported women’s suffrage as a means of preserving white supremacy. In addition, throughout the country strong sentiment reflected the view that any non-white

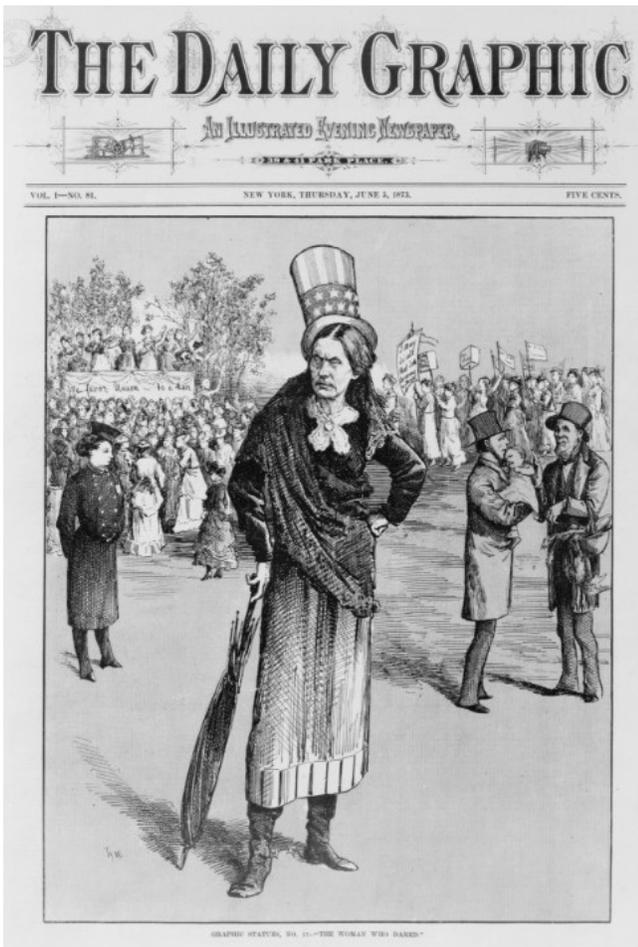


▲ Photograph of Lucy Stone between 1840 and 1860. Library of Congress.

or immigrant individual was racially inferior and too ignorant to vote. In this vein, Anthony and Stanton used racially charged language in advocating for an educational requirement to vote. Unfortunately for many, universal suffrage challenged too many of their assumptions about the prevailing social structure.

### The New Departure: Testing the Fourteenth Amendment

But there was another amendment which interested NWSA: the Fourteenth. In keeping with NWSA's more confrontational approach,



▲ A caricature of Susan B. Anthony that appeared in a New York newspaper right before her trial. Thomas Wust, June 5, 1873. Library of Congress.

Anthony decided to test the meaning of the newly ratified Fourteenth Amendment. The Amendment stated in part, “No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States...” Anthony thought it was clear that this language protected the right of women to vote. After all, wasn’t voting a privilege of citizens?

The Fourteenth Amendment went on to state that representation in Congress would be reduced for states which denied the vote to *male inhabitants over 21*. In other words, states could choose to deny men over 21 the vote, but they would be punished with proportionally less representation (and therefore less power) in Congress. So in the end, the Fourteenth Amendment encouraged states to give all men over 21 the vote, but did not require it. The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, banned states from denying the vote based on race, color, or having been enslaved in the past.

### Susan B. Anthony on Trial

It was the Fourteenth Amendment’s protection of “privileges or immunities” that Anthony decided to test. On November 5, 1872, she and two dozen other women walked into the local polling place in Rochester, New York, and cast a vote in the presidential election. (Anthony voted for Ulysses S. Grant.) She was arrested and charged with voting in a federal election “without having a lawful right to vote.”

Before her trial, 52-year-old Anthony traveled all over her home county giving a speech entitled “Is it a Crime for a Citizen of the United States to Vote?” In it, she called on all her fellow citizens, from judges to potential jurors, to support equal rights for women.

At her trial, Anthony’s lawyer pointed out the unequal treatment under the law:

“If this same act [voting] had been done by her brother, it would have been honorable. But having been done by a woman, it is said to be a crime . . . I believe this is the first instance in which a woman has been arraigned [accused] in a criminal court merely on account of her sex.”

The judge refused to let Anthony testify in her own defense, found her guilty of voting without the right to do so, and ordered her to pay a \$100 fine. Anthony responded:

“In your ordered verdict of guilty, you have trampled underfoot every vital principle of our government. My natural rights, my civil rights, my political rights, my judicial rights are all alike ignored . . . I shall never pay a dollar of your unjust penalty. And I shall earnestly and persistently continue to urge all women.”

She concluded by quoting Thomas Jefferson:

“Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.”

Anthony’s case did not make it all the way to the Supreme Court. However, the Court did rule three years later in a different case, *Minor v. Happersett* (1875), that voting was not among the privileges or immunities of citizens and the Fourteenth Amendment did not protect a woman’s right to vote.

## Suffrage in the West

While Anthony and other suffragists were agitating in the Northeast, railroads had helped open up the Great Plains and the American West to settlement. The Gold Rush of 1849 had enticed many thousands of settlers to the rugged West, and homesteading pioneers continued to push the frontier. These territories (and later states), were among the first to give women the right to vote: Wyoming Territory in 1869, followed by Utah Territory (1870), and Washington Territory (1883).

These territories had many reasons for extending suffrage to women, most related to the need to increase population. They would need to meet minimum population requirements to apply for statehood, and the free publicity they would get for giving women the vote might bring more people. And they did not just need more people—they needed women: There were six males for every female in some places. Some were motivated to give white women the vote to offset the influence of African American votes. And finally, there were, of course, those who genuinely believed that giving women the vote was the right thing to do.

Though several western legislatures had considered proposals to give women the vote



▲ *Representative Women*, seven prominent figures of the suffrage and women’s rights movement. Clockwise from the top: Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mary Livermore, Lydia Marie Child, Susan B. Anthony, Grace Greenwood, and Anna E. Dickinson (center). L. Schamer; L. Prang & Co. publisher, 1870. Library of Congress.

since the 1850s, in 1869 Wyoming became the first territory to give women full political rights, including voting and eligibility to hold public office. In 1870, Louisa Garner Swain was the first woman in Wyoming to cast a ballot, and a life-sized statue honors her memory in Laramie.

Under territorial government, Wyoming's population had grown slowly and most people lived on ranches or in small towns. Territorial leaders believed Wyoming would be more attractive to newcomers once statehood was achieved, as had been the case in other western states. The territory came close to reaching the threshold of 60,000 people for statehood, but many doubted whether that number had actually been reached.

Territorial Governor Francis E. Warren refused to wait for more people to move there. He set in motion the plans for a constitutional convention. Though they had the right to do so, no women ran for seats at the Wyoming constitutional convention. Borrowing passages from other state constitutions, delegates quickly drafted the constitution in September 1889. The new element of this constitution is

that it enshrined the protections of women's political rights by simply stating that equality would exist without reference to gender. Only one delegate, Louis J. Palmer, objected to women's suffrage. Wyoming voters approved the document in November, and the territory applied for statehood.

In the House of Representatives there was some opposition, mostly from Democrats, because the territory was known to lean Republican. Debate did not openly center on party affiliation, but on a combination of doubts about whether Wyoming had truly achieved the required population and on reluctance to admit a state where women had political rights. In response, Wyoming's legislature sent a telegram: "We will remain out of the Union a hundred years rather than come in without our women!" Wyoming officially joined the union in 1890, becoming the 44th state. Anthony praised Wyoming for its adherence to the nation's Founding principles: "Wyoming is the first place on God's green earth which could consistently claim to be the land of the free!"

## REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. What was the Cult of True Womanhood, or Cult of Domesticity?
2. How did the Industrial Revolution challenge the notion that upper- and middle-class women's bodies were too delicate for work outside the home?
3. Describe the events leading to the split in the women's movement in 1869.
4. What are some actions in which Susan B. Anthony worked for the cause of women's suffrage in a very personal way?
5. In your judgment, which of the following was the most significant event in this part of the story of the journey towards woman's suffrage? Explain.
  - The Fourteenth Amendment is ratified

- Susan B. Anthony is jailed for voting
  - Western territories give women the vote
  - Other (explain)
6. Using the **Principles and Virtues Glossary**, give examples of ways in which people involved in the debate over suffrage for women demonstrated any three of the constitutional principles and any three of the civic virtues listed below.
- **Principles:** equality, republican/representative government, popular sovereignty, federalism, inalienable rights, freedom of speech/press/assembly
  - **Virtues:** perseverance, contribution, moderation, resourcefulness, courage, respect, justice

Principle	Example & Explanation

Virtue	Example & Explanation

### A Pathway for Change



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